

Buying Clinic

Whether you're looking for new kit or want to improve your existing hardware, you'll always find the very best advice at the Buying Clinic – where you never spend more than you have to

CONTACT

BUYING CLINIC

If you need buying advice on hardware and software, write to:
Buying Clinic
Computer Shopper
 30 Cleveland Street
 London W1T 4JD
 or email:

clinic@computershopper.co.uk



SCANNER BUYING ADVICE

I NEED A GOOD QUALITY SCANNER

Q I need a new scanner. I currently use an Epson Perfection 2480, which produces sharp images but I find that the results are too dark. No amount of adjusting the scanner settings or processing in my photo-editing software can cure the problem. I need a scanner that will give me professional-quality scans with perfect colours instantly and without any fuss. My original scanner, a Devcom Black Widow, was excellent, but it doesn't work with Windows XP Professional Edition. To get the level of quality I need, I expect to pay between £100 and £300. What do you suggest?

Ron Burtenshaw

A We were surprised to hear that you couldn't get acceptable results from the Epson Perfection 2480. In our tests it produced excellent scans and we had no problem with images that were too dark. In fact, we found

that it had a slight bias towards warm colours. We recommend that you contact Epson's technical support department to see if you have a faulty scanner before you consider spending any more money. If you're scanning transparencies, make sure you expose the transparency backlight before scanning by removing its cover. It's easy to forget this, but if you do the results will be extremely dark.

If you still can't get adequate results from the 2480, you could try to revive your old Devcom scanner. Without the exact model number we couldn't track down a Windows XP driver for you, but searching on Google revealed several sites that explain how to connect a Black Widow scanner in Windows XP.

If after all that you decide to buy a new scanner, we'd recommend Epson's Perfection 4180 Photo, which costs around £170 including VAT.



▲ The Epson Perfection 4180 won a Best Buy award in our March issue

HARD DISK MAINTENANCE

WHY IS MY PC SO SLOW?

Q I have a Dell 4600 PC with a 3.06GHz Pentium 4 processor and a 120GB hard disk. The hard disk is now nearly full, with just 8GB free, and my PC seems to be running slowly. Could the full hard disk cause this slowing? I ran anti-virus and anti-spyware software, and both reported that my computer is clean.

If a new hard disk will help, which should I buy? Dell sells a 120GB disk for £160, but many suppliers offer 200GB disks for far less. Would any hard disk be compatible with my PC, and is adding one merely a matter of plugging it into the spare slot provided?

Ian Read

A A very full hard disk can cause Windows to slow down, but this may not be your problem. There are several things to check before buying a new hard disk.

First, make sure your hard disk isn't significantly fragmented. From the Start menu select Accessories, System Tools, Disk Defragmenter. This utility scans your hard disk and reorganises your data, making it quicker and easier to access. As you have more than 110GB of data to check, we recommend that you run it overnight.

If you've had your computer for some time and installed lots of software, there may be lots of programs running that you don't need. This is easy to test in Windows XP. Boot your computer and, as soon as you have logged on with your username, hold down the shift key. Don't let it go until your entire desktop has appeared. This will start Windows without any of the programs that usually run automatically when you log on. If Windows runs much faster in this state, you should consider uninstalling software that you no longer use, paying particular attention to the programs that run in your system tray. You'll find other speed-enhancing tips in this month's *Advanced Windows* on page 237.

If you decide to add an extra hard disk, you should find installation simple. Desktop hard disks fall into two categories: those that connect with Serial ATA (SATA) and those that use Parallel ATA (PATA). To find out which you need, examine the hard disk in your PC. If it is connected by a flat, wide ribbon cable, you need a standard IDE hard disk that connects through PATA. If your disk is connected by a thin cable that's around a centimetre wide, you need a SATA disk. Neither type is hard to connect (see *PC Builder*, page 268). SATA disks also have SATA written on them, whereas PATA disks are usually labelled IDE or EIDE.

DESKTOP PC BUILDING

BUILDING A SCHOOL PC

Q I am thinking of building my next PC. Can you recommend a decent barebones mini PC that costs less than £400? I want to use it for educational purposes.

Faizan Sarwar

A If you want a mini PC for running educational software, we recommend the Asus Pundit-R. This small, slim mini PC case costs just £109 including VAT. It has no AGP slot for a graphics card, but this won't matter for educational use. By adding a Celeron processor you could easily turn it into a complete PC for well under £400. You'll need a monitor to complete the setup.





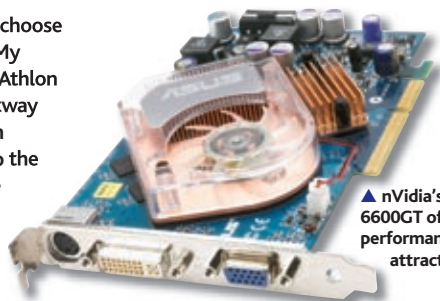
GRAPHICS CARD DEDICATED V INTEGRATED

SHOULD I BUY A SEPARATE GRAPHICS CARD?

Q Can you help me choose a graphics card? My computer has an Athlon XP 2400+ processor on a Jetway V2MDMP motherboard with 256MB of RAM. According to the motherboard handbook, the onboard graphics use up to 64MB of RAM.

Would I get better performance from games if I added a graphics card? The handbook also says that the motherboard supports only AGP 4X. Does this mean the newer 8X graphics cards won't work in my PC? Can you recommend a graphics card that will work and give me the best performance?

Keith Farrell



▲ NVIDIA's GeForce 6600GT offers great performance at an attractive price

A A dedicated graphics card will perform much better than your current onboard graphics and will free up system memory too. While the motherboard's manual says it has an AGP 4X slot, you can still use newer 8X cards, as they are backwards compatible.

You'll lose a little performance but nothing really noticeable.

For a good compromise between speed and price we recommend the Asus 6600GT TOP AGP graphics card. This is based on NVIDIA's GeForce

6600GT graphics chip which will provide ample performance and costs £138 including VAT from www.eclipsecomputers.co.uk.

Anything more expensive would only be held back by your two-year old CPU.

Finally, as you have only 256MB of RAM, we recommend that you upgrade to 512MB. This will give Windows more breathing space and should help your applications and games run more smoothly.



WIN

PC Hardware Annoyances

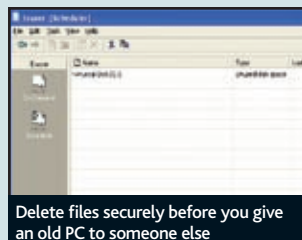
If you send our star letter, you'll receive a prize. This month's winner gets a copy of O'Reilly's *PC Hardware Annoyances*, which will help you fix any number of hardware problems your PC might be experiencing. If you don't want to spend the rest of your life troubleshooting, keep this book next to your PC along with the latest copy of *Computer Shopper*. Your PC woes will disappear.

DESKTOP PC FILE ERASING

HOW DO I CLEAN MY DISK?

Q I'd like to give my old Windows 95 PC away. I've deleted all my personal files but I've heard that they can be recovered. Short of reinstalling Windows from scratch, is there something I can buy to erase them permanently?

David Hawksley



A You're right to be worried. When Windows deletes a file it doesn't remove it from the disk; it just designates the space that contains the file as free. Tools are available for free that can recover these files. This is useful if you delete a file by accident. The tools can also be used to recover data from your donated PC.

We recommend that you securely erase the free space on your hard disk. You can download

Eraser free from www.dirfile.com. Once you've downloaded the Zip file, extract the files and run the installation. Eraser will run automatically. From the File menu click New Task and select your hard disk from the menu under Unused space on drive. It's probably called Local Disk (C:). Click OK to continue.

Right-click the new task in the program's main window and select Run. Once it has finished, your files should be gone for good.

STORAGE PORTABLE DISK DRIVES

WHERE CAN I STORE RAW?

Q I recently bought an 8-megapixel digital camera that captures images in RAW mode for the highest quality. Each RAW photo takes up to 12MB of space on my memory card. I can't afford to buy enough cards to keep all the photos I take when on holiday or a photo trip. Are there any portable disk drives available to which I could copy my files without needing a computer?

Ideally I want the maximum disk space at the lowest cost. I don't need to be able to view my pictures on the device.

Paul Fretwell



▲ FlashTrax can store and display up to 40GB of RAW files

A There are a few suitable devices. The best we've tested is SmartDisk's FlashTrax, but it's expensive at £280 for 40GB. Some of this pays for the screen, which can display RAW photos from most makes of camera. SmartDisk also makes the FotoChute, which copies pictures from a camera over USB. A 20GB model costs £162 including VAT.

Otherwise, you could try the Macally Synbox. This gadget costs around £25 and copies data from one USB device to another. You could use it to copy files from your camera to a 1GB USB flash memory drive or portable hard disk, although you have no way of verifying that your files have transferred safely.

HARD DISK SPECIFICATION

CAN MY PC COPE WITH USB2?

Q My daughter has an Apple iPod and now my PC's 40GB hard disk is filling up rapidly, so I am thinking of buying a new hard disk. I read your *Labs* test of external hard disks in *Shopper* June 2005 with interest and wonder if I'd be better off buying one of these than an internal drive. Also, I see that most external disks use a USB2 connection, while my PC supports only USB1.1. Does this mean they won't work?

Michael Downing

A USB2 devices are fully compatible with USB1.1 ports, but USB1.1 ports are slower than USB2 ports. This means your USB2 disk's performance will be hampered, running at only 11Mbit/s rather than the 480Mbit/s that the Hi-Speed mode of USB2 offers. In practice the slower speed of USB1.1 would make external storage slow and frustrating to use. However, if you want the simplicity of external



External hard disks are easy to install, but more expensive than their internal counterparts

storage, you can buy a PCI USB2 card. MicroDirect (www.microdirect.co.uk) sells a USB2 PCI 5 Port Host card for £11.

If you're happy to delve inside your PC, you can buy a much cheaper internal disk. Western Digital's 250GB Caviar WD2500BB is available for just £84 from www.savastore.com. Your PC is probably quite old so make sure you buy an internal hard disk that has an ATA-100 or ATA-133 interface, as your computer will not support SATA disks. **CS**